

Voice Of Reason



He is not afraid to voice his opinion when he feels that a decision is being made that is not in the best interest of the country. He continues to believe in the principles that molded his political journey at the beginning. Leader of the Jathika Nidahas Peramuna (National Freedom Front) and Minister of Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities, Wimal Weerawansa is still the modest and humble person he was yesterday. As a member of a constituent party of the UPFA government he has maintained his identity without being engulfed into the whole. Speak to him and you will see that his is the voice of reason.

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Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Mahesh Bandara

ou and your party-the Jathika Nidahas Peramuna-are significant partners of the UPFA government, what is your role within the government?

Our role within the government is twofolds. Firstly, to work together to fulfill the promises we made to the people during the last election as a government through

the individual ministries we are responsible for. Secondly, to ensure that the government makes the correct decisions and takes proper actions to counter the challenges that the country is facing. That is to be the voice of reason. These are the two aspects that we focus on within the government.

...To Ensure That The Government Makes The Correct Decisions And Takes Proper Actions To Counter The Challenges That The Country Is Facing. That Is To Be The Voice Of Reason... Even If We Are Within The United People's Freedom Alliance Government Or Whether We Are Outside, As In The The Past We Will Continue To Fulfill The Responsibilities.

You have never been afraid to voice your opinion at times even against the decisions of the government. In today's political context that happens very rarely, how important is it for politicians to be proactive?

If we look at our country within the global context; there are developed, developing and under-developed countries. Sri Lanka does not belong to the first category, whichever category we belong to in the other two, politicians in this country have an immense responsibility. One is to ensure that the policies with which the country is governed are conducive to the people of this country. Secondly, to ensure that the policies safeguard national interests and thirdly, considering the challenges that we are facing from international forces, politicians are required to act in a responsible and forward thinking manner to protect the country.

Even if we are within the United People's Freedom Alliance government or whether we are outside, as in the past we will continue to fulfill the responsibilities that I mentioned in the present and as well as in the future. Today we may be partners of the government but our thinking or ideas that we present to this country have remained unchanged. It is a continuation of what we have said in the past, it is not anything new.

We believe that with the challenges that the country is facing, the political leadership as well as political forces should be much more mindful and responsible than any other country. Whatever difficulties or dangers we have to face we will continue to say and do what we feel is right for the country. We will not waver from our stance.

With the Western and Southern Provincial Council Elections coming up this year, will your party be contesting with the UPFA? How do you think the Alliance will fare?

The Jathika Nidahas Peramuna is contesting under the umbrella of the UPFA as a partner. If we look at the results of Uva, Wayamba and Central Provincial Council Elections that were held recently, anyone can see that even though certain people make allegation against the government, the UPFA secured an overwhelming victory in the aforementioned Provincial Councils. We will see a continuation of that victory in the Western and Southern Provincial Council Elections as well.

There are many who are trying to prevent this from happening but there is no doubt that the UPFA will secure victory as it has earned the love and trust of the people of this country.

What are your thoughts on the quality of the candidates for the up coming elections? We see many new comers coming into the fray many of them have not even worked for the people before.

A major problem that we are facing in politics in this country is that there are many who are entering politics with various agendas in their minds. Some do so to develop their businesses, others to protect their illegal businesses from the law, then there are those who enter politics thinking that they can win because of their popularity in another field and finally politicians who have worked and been with the people for years and know the pulse of the people, enter politics genuinely so that they can do something for the people of this country.

It is the last category of politicians who actually behave responsibly and work for the betterment of the people regardless of the political party they belong to. We may not accept their political affiliations but it is those who have worked and been in this sphere for a long time who are able to win elections and continue to remain in politics for a considerable amount of time. The others who contest because of the popularity they have gained in another sphere may win the first time, but will be unable to do so the second and third time. In order for them to win the second or third time they need to have gained the trust as well as show the people that they are able to do a credible amount of work and are capable of undertaking social responsibilities.

The Ones Who Have Entered Politics With The Correct Understanding Will Remain, The Others Are Automatically Left Behind. Just Like The Sun Rises It Has To Set Too.

Unfortunately except for a very few, the majority of those who enter politics due to popularity in other fields fail the second test. There are only a very few who have come from other fields that have been able to win the first time, prove their worth and continuously win successive elections. The ones who have entered politics with the correct understanding will remain, the others are automatically left behind. Just like the sun rises it has to set too.

What are your thoughts on the prevailing political culture in the country?

The political culture of this country is much better than it was a decade ago. If you look at that time there were political clashes, disturbances at election centres and fraudulent voting. Furthermore, the accusations that were levelled against politicians were much more severe than it is now. Comparatively, there has been an improvement in terms of politicians and elections than in the past. However, it is not at its best.

The reason as to why certain individuals who have gained popularity in other fields are entering politics today is that there is peace in this country and it is safe to be a politician. During the conflict being a politician was very dangerous and it was almost like having a death sentence to be on stage. At that time the people who entered politics were those who genuinely wanted to be in the field and felt passionate about the country. Today there is peace in this country and people are entering politics even for fun.

Anyone can enter politics but it is the people who decide whether they win and if so for how long will they continue. People do not make the same mistake twice, even if they make a mistake the first time, they know to correct it the second time.

The fact that actors, musicians and sports personalities are entering politics means that they are thinking about this field in a positive manner. They feel it is a good career path. In the past when a person says that he wants to enter politics his family will not allow it but that is not so today. If a person's horoscope indicates that it is good for that person to enter politics he will do so even if he does not have any experience. It is the same with infants, if their horoscope says

they should get into politics their families will encourage it. That is the situation today, which we did not see in the past.

This is a result of Sri Lanka having peace in the country. There is nothing wrong in people from other fields entering politics, but they should do so with a deep understanding of social matters, with a sense of great responsibility and loyalty towards the country.

You are the Minister of Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities. Can you talk about the work completed so far?

Our ministry alone was able to contribute to the development of 45,000 houses in 2013. Then, if we take the development initiatives of the entire government that is considering all institutions, over 200,000 houses have been developed in 2013. With great responsibility we can say that the Jana Sevana programme that we initiated three years ago, which focuses on the development and construction of houses has been very active and has worked with immense responsibility. This has been recognised by the people.

The Growth Rate Of The Construction Industry Has Exceeded 21.6 Percent In The Last Quarter. Following Independence The Annual Growth Rate Of The Construction Industry Has Never Exceeded Five Percent. To Have Reached A Growth Rate Of Over 21.6 Percent Is A Great Achievement. To Ensure That This Growth Continues In The Future We Are Introducing The Necessary Policies And Structural Changes.

If we look at the construction industry during the past three to four years, it has seen great improvement. Government institutions such as the State Engineering Corporation have such a large amount of work that at times they cannot even manage it. There was a time when these institutions did not have work and were almost closed down. We have focused on improving their administrative processes and today they have garnered the trust of the people and are able to maximise the opportunities that are available.

The growth rate of the construction industry has exceeded 21.6 percent in the last quarter. Following Independence the annual growth rate of the construction industry has never exceeded five percent. To have reached a growth rate of over 21.6 percent is a great achievement. To ensure that this growth continues in the future we are introducing the necessary policies and structural changes. One

such step forward is the Institute for Construction Training and Development (ICTAD). We have been able to secure the approval of the Cabinet to convert ICTAD into an authority. Once it has become an authority, this institution is able to regulate and engage in activities that will develop the construction industry. Furthermore, in the next few months once ICTAD becomes an authority it will be able to work towards the betterment of the skilled workers in the industry and give them due recognition. A major challenge in the industry is finding good quality skilled workers. We have now put in place a mechanism to address this issue.

Therefore, in the past three years we have been able to do a large amount of work in developing the construction and housing sector in this country compared to the past. We ensured that families with talented individuals were provided houses, with this the message went out to the children that even with the greatest difficulties in order to overcome their challenges the country and government is with them. For example if a student does well in his/her exams and in the newspapers if they mention that they do not have a house, we would receive a call asking us to provide that student with a house. The environment is such that this is possible. There is a human factor to housing now, which is something that we were able to achieve.

There is much more to be done, however when looking back at the past three years, we can be happy that we have given our best and were able to make great strides in the housing and construction sector.

There is much more to be done in terms of housing within Colombo itself, what mechanisms have been put in place to address this issue?

Within the Colombo Municipality, if we look at low income households they are living under great difficulties. They live in temporary housing in large estates (wathu). Those areas are referred to by numbers. In most instances when a child from such an area tries to secure admission to a school they are refused. They face a lot of difficulties and ultimately get dragged into drugs and other illegal ways of earning an income. The President and the government have put in place to build flats for these people so that they do not have to live in shanties anymore. By 2015, more than 15,000 families will receive a secure place to live. Though there are rumours being spread to agitate and discourage these people, we will ensure that they receive a permanent place that they call their own.

Our attention has also been drawn to areas beyond the Colombo city limits. In Koralawella, Moratuwa, two programmes consisting of more than 300 flats have been developed for low income families including those who live along the coastal belt, near the railway tracks as well as those facing sea erosion. Then in Lunawa there is a housing project for 500 houses, which is ongoing. That too, is for low income and lower middle income families. In this way we have identified places where there are families living under deplorable conditions and we will take the necessary action. By 2015 we will be able to see a great improvement.

We Have Come To This Level Not With Any Special Support From Anyone Except With The Confidence And The Support Given By The People Of This Country. Because They Have Seen That We Walk The Talk And That We Keep Our Word. Our Main Aim Is To Ensure That We Maintain The Confidence That The People Have In Us And Continue Our Journey Forward.

Can you elaborate on your political journey from the beginning to now?

I entered politics not with any personal interests in mind, that is, not with the expectation of being a minister or any personal gain. As students we witnessed Sri Lanka signing the Indo-Sri Lanka peace accord, we saw the Indian Peace Keeping Force coming into the country and many prominent people being killed. It is the emotions that were generated by witnessing such incidents that made me join politics through the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). As members of the JVP we gained experience in areas that one would not be able to do so in any other political party. One could say that there is both a positive and negative in the experiences that one gains by being in the JVP. But the most important aspect is the discipline that you acquire by being in the party, which we have done.

Historically, the JVP supported the government in its war efforts to eliminate terrorism in the country. However, as a result of misdirection and with the JVP going on a different path, we had to part ways and I formed the Jathika Nidahas Peramuna. Yet, as a party we still follow the principles that we believed in while being in the JVP, even if we are not part of them today.

We have come to this level not with any special support from anyone except with the confidence and the support given by the people of this country. Because they have seen that we walk the talk and that we keep our word. Our main aim is to ensure that we maintain the confidence that the people have in us and continue our journey forward.

What are your future plans?

To serve my country even better than I do today.

Final thoughts?

Sri Lanka is facing a great challenge today. In 2005, as a country we started our second independence struggle. That is to overcome the social problems left behind after the first independence struggle. The main issue was the ethnic conflict and related problems. By 2005, there was a situation where the country could not go forward without ending the 30 year long conflict. It was a matter of either dividing the country into two or looking at a military solution to eliminating terrorism from the country. We consider this the first inning of the second independence struggle. Sri Lanka won the first inning. If President Mahinda Rajapaksa had not won in 2005, then we would not have been able to win this first inning and the country would have been divided in two with each section fighting each other as well as amongst themselves, like South Sudan.

South Sudan was formed as a country for those who follow the Christian faith. Today the President and the Vice President are fighting against each other. To solve this, international organisations such as the UN and other NGOs have entered the country. Therefore after division, again within the newly formed countries problems and divisions are created. This is the same situation that would have been created in Sri Lanka, if we had not defeated terrorism. However, this does not imply that separatist ideologies have completely disappeared or the agenda of the West to propagate this aspiration has stopped. They are still pushing that agenda. Western countries including the USA, have created a negative image of Sri Lanka internationally. They are trying to corner Sri Lanka by passing resolutions in Geneva.

Everyone In This Country Regardless Of The Political Party, Race, Ethnicity Or Religion Should Stand Together To Face This Challenge, It Is Only Then That We Will Be Able To Reap The Full Benefits Of Peace Won In 2009 And Enjoy Greater Economic Growth Where The Sacrifices This Country Made Would Not Be In Vain.

If these resolutions are passed in Geneva, by the end of this year it is possible that USA might single handedly impose sanctions on certain sectors. Because it is to that stage that they are creating negative image of Sri Lanka internationally. They are hoping that there would be national elections at the beginning of next year. If

they are able to create pressure in certain sectors by imposing sanctions, they hope that the people will turn against the government and in turn the government will lose the elections.

It is only if the current government loses national level elections that they will be able to take President Mahinda Rajapaksa in front of the International Criminal Courts. As long as the government is in power they will not be able to do so. However, it is not only for this reason that they want to topple the government. Today, Chief Minister Wigneswaran of the TNA is saying that the country does not need a united state but one where the provincial council has much more power than it does now. Another TNA member who is the Member of Parliament from the Batticaloa district says that they will discuss a solution to the national problem only once the resolution in Geneva is passed and President Mahinda Rajapaksa is taken before the International Criminal Court. Without a change in regime President Mahinda Rajapaksa cannot be taken before international courts. This is the situation we are facing and we consider this the second inning of the second independence struggle. If we fail to win this second inning then all the achievements that we gained from the first victory will be lost.

There are many mechanisms taking place nationally to address this issue. But there are those who are trying to mislead this national journey by taking a totally detrimental mode of action to create disharmony between communities. Therefore the challenge ahead is to ensure that the national mechanism that took the country forward since 2005, is not side tracked by people with vested interests, where we face the international scrutiny that is being directed at our country successfully to safeguard the reputation and integrity of Sri Lanka. Everyone in this country regardless of the political party, race, ethnicity or religion should stand together to face this challenge, it is only then that we will be able to reap the full benefits of peace won in 2009 and enjoy greater economic growth where the sacrifices this country made would not be in vain.





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